

## Green city? A Grounded Theory Approach

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### Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo es ofrecer una breve visión general de la tesis de máster prevista. Puesto que la investigación para la tesis de máster se encuentra todavía en sus etapas iniciales, no es posible entregar un artículo aislado sobre el tema elegido, esta no es tampoco mi intención aquí. El tema elegido es Ljubljana, su galardón como Capital Verde Europea 2016, y los cambios que comportan dicha distinción. También reflexionaré brevemente sobre la ciudad de Barcelona, ya que hay cambios similares a los de Ljubljana. A este respecto, han sucedido una serie de cambios que se enumeran en este documento, como las redes de ciclismo y peatones, la gestión de residuos o la protección de las zonas verdes. Es mi intención recurrir a la teoría fundamentada para esta investigación, y detallaré para ello la metodología de la teoría fundamentada. Por lo tanto, la pregunta de investigación en este punto es: ¿Qué entienden los habitantes de Ljubljana por "Capital Verde Europea" y tiene algún impacto en su vida cotidiana? Si es así ¿cuáles y cuáles son las consecuencias? En este trabajo, sin embargo, me centraré en la cuestión de la "sostenibilidad urbana" y tras un intento de definición de dicho término, quedará claro por qué el enfoque de la investigación de tesis de máster no estará en esta discusión. Para concluir, proporcionaré una perspectiva acerca de cuáles deberían ser los próximos pasos a seguir.

**Palabras clave:** antropología urbana; ciudad; sostenibilidad urbana; redes de tráfico; ciudad verde.

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to give a short overview of the planned Master thesis. Since the research for the Master thesis is still in its beginning stages it is not possible to deliver a secluded paper on the chosen topic, this is also not the intention of this paper. The chosen topic is Ljubljana and it's winning the award of the European Green Capital 2016, and the changes that encompass said winning. Also the city of Barcelona will be shortly discussed, as there are changes similar to the ones in Ljubljana. There have been a number of changes that will be listed in this paper, such as cycling and pedestrian networks, waste management, protection of green areas. It is the intention to use Grounded Theory for this research, and the methodology of Grounded Theory will be explained. Therefore the research question at this point is: What do inhabitants of Ljubljana understand by "European Green Capital" and has it an impact on their everyday lives, and if so which and what are the consequences? In this paper however one focus will be on the matter of 'urban sustainability' and after an attempt of

a definition of said term, it will be made clear why the Master thesis research focus will not be on this discussion. To conclude an outlook will be given on what the next steps should be.

**Keywords:** urban anthropology; city; urban sustainability; traffic networks; green city

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## Introduction

Ljubljana is the “European Green Capital 2016” within the EU and the changes around this labeling will be the subject of the planned master thesis. Ljubljana used to have a lot of car traffic, especially on the main traffic artery, Slovenska street, which has been modified. The focus of the city is now on public transport and on pedestrian and cycling networks. Another focus is the preservation and protection of green areas. Waste management and urban gardening is a part of the changes as well (<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/europeangreencapital>). At the moment these changes are concentrated on the center of the city, and not reaching the margins (yet).

But besides those changes initiated through city politics and municipality there are other changes as well. On the one hand the tourism industry is focusing more and more on the said labeling as to attract more tourists and on the other hand there are local initiatives and projects that fall within this scope. Those projects range from environment protection to co-working corporations and recycling as well as culinary initiatives. This means that the changes are also initiated by the Ljubljana population and furthermore economic factors are a crucial aspect as well.

The research question is: What do inhabitants of Ljubljana understand by “European Green Capital” and has it an impact on their everyday lives, and if so which and what are the consequences? It is not the intention of the planned Master thesis to engage in a discussion of what is sustainability respectively urban sustainability. This point will be discussed in this paper, to illustrate the problems with the term “sustainability”. Rather it is the intention to focus on the people living, working, studying in Ljubljana and get a glimpse of how the above mentioned changes affect their lives, if and how they are included in decisions and what actions are taken by non-government institutions.

Much the same goes for Barcelona. In this city there are plans to build Superblocks, this is an ongoing project since 2013 and should be finalized in 2018 according to the official website ([www.bcnecologia.net](http://www.bcnecologia.net)). With Superblocks the interior is closed to motorized vehicles and it gives preference to pedestrian traffic in the public space. It is seen as an integral solution to the use of public space, uniting urban planning with mobility. The research questions remains the same as for the case of Ljubljana. Furthermore there will be an attempt if and how similarities can be drawn between these two cities.

The chosen methodology is Grounded Theory, because it allows the researcher to go beyond the sustainability discussion and examine what lies 'beneath' that layer. Therefore in this paper there will be no conclusions in a classic understanding of the word, since when working with Grounded Theory in the beginning of the research there is only a general problem interest, and only in the process of the research the research question and thus the topic becomes more precise. Therefore the focus here lies on, first, giving an explanation of what Grounded Theory is and how it works, and second, on why the Master thesis will not engage in a sustainability discussion.

## **Two cities – an attempt of a comparison**

More and more cities are making changes in their traffic system. Pedestrians, bicycles and cars are sharing space within cities. Here are two examples of cities (Ljubljana and Barcelona) that are trying to deal with this challenge, and are using the "sustainability agenda" to do so.

### ***The city of Ljubljana***

The city of Ljubljana is the capital of Slovenia and has 280.607 inhabitants. It is the administrative, economic and political center of Slovenia. Ljubljana won the European Green Capital Award in 2016 due to the changes of the city in sustainability over the previous 10 – 15 years. The said changes include various areas, such as ([www.greenljubljana.com](http://www.greenljubljana.com)):

- The modification of the traffic regime in the main traffic artery, which is (was) Slovenska Street. This was the most significant measure that has been taken.
- The preservation and protection of green areas which are characteristic for the city
- The revitalization and transformation of brownfield spaces.
- Progress in terms of the treatment of waste and waste water. The city is committed to pursuing a zero waste objective.  
Zero waste objective takes into account three priorities: waste prevention and reduction, product reuse and material recycling. In the last ten years the quantity of separately collected waste has increased from 16 to 145 kilogram per resident.

### ***European Green Capital Award***

The European Green Capital Award (<http://ec.europa.eu>) is the result of an initiative of 15 European cities (Tallinn, Helsinki, Riga, Vilnius, Berlin, Warsaw, Madrid, Ljubljana, Prague, Vienna, Kiel, Kotka, Dartford, Tartu, Glasgow). This initiative was launched by the European Commission in 2008. The award aims to provide an incentive for cities to inspire each other and share best practices, while also engaging in friendly competition, so the cities become role models for each other. The overarching message that the award scheme aims to communicate to the local level is that Europeans have a right to live in healthy urban areas. Cities should therefore strive to improve the quality of life of their citizens and reduce their impact on the global environment. Since 2010 one European city is selected each year as the European Green Capital of the year. In order to receive the award the city has to:

- have a consistent record of achieving high environmental standards;

- be committed to ongoing and ambitious goals for further environmental improvement and sustainable development;
- act as a role model to inspire other cities and promote best practice to all other European cities.

The policy background as stated on the European Green Capitals webpage (<http://ec.europa.eu>) is to support and encourage Europe's towns and cities to adopt a more integrated approach to urban management. This should ensure that they become better places to live in and reduce environmental impacts, as well as inviting local and regional authorities to explore the opportunities offered at EU level.

### ***Superblocks in Barcelona***

As stated on the website of Urban Mobility Plan of Barcelona 2013-2018 ([www.bcnecologia.net](http://www.bcnecologia.net)) this is a plan that attempts to lay down guidelines in matters of mobility for the city of Barcelona with a clear focus on sustainability. The goal is to achieve the implementation of Superblocks with a level of traffic saturation similar to the present. Therefore, the site states, alternative transportation will be better implemented, such as orthogonal bus, bicycle networks, carpool and pedestrian lanes, by simultaneously increasing the price of metered parking. First the question of what is a superblock needs to be answered. It is a new model of mobility that restructures the typical urban road network. Superblocks are made up of a grid of basic roads forming a polygon, some 400 by 400 meters, with both interior and exterior components. The interior is closed to motorized vehicles (with exceptions: residential traffic, services, emergency vehicles, un/loading vehicles under special circumstances) and above ground parking, thus giving preference to pedestrian traffic in the public space. The Superblock is seen as an integral solution to the use of public space, limiting the presence of private vehicles in order to return the public space to the citizen. It is supposed to increase urban quality, quality of life of residents and visitors, enhance social cohesion and increase economic activity.

In these statements found on the website of Urban Mobility Plan of Barcelona 2013-2018 there are a number of propositions that need to be addressed. First is the fact that parking prices are rising in order to push the agenda of public transport which is a questionable action. In relation to this is the statement of "returning public space to the citizen" by limiting the presence of private vehicles. This declaration sounds as though "the citizen" is equal to a pedestrian, and citizens do not own or need vehicles. Last the phrase "urban quality" is one of utter inaccuracy and unfortunately there was no explanation as to what was meant by this phrase. As can be seen clearly in these few citations, the plans of changing mainly transportation systems in Barcelona are affecting citizens in their daily lives in many ways. If these changes are seen as positive or perhaps negative by the citizens however is not addressed on the website.

Some parallels can be seen between Barcelona and Ljubljana. In both cities the focus is on pedestrians, public transport and cycling networks. Those are favored above car traffic. Also some streets are being closed to general traffic, thus limiting it. Similar questions to the ones in Ljubljana arise. How do the changes affect the citizens in their everyday lives? Are the citizens part of the decision-making process of the said changes, if so, how are they being included?

### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded Theory is „a conceptually dense theory [...] which explains many of the researched phenomena” (Strauss 1991: 25). With this rather short, but nonetheless precise statement the gist of what is Grounded Theory is summarized. The following will be a description of what Grounded Theory is, and how to work with a Grounded Theory Methodology.

Typical in working with Grounded Theory is, that in the beginning of the research process the researcher has a rather broad interest field. The topic is not precisely framed at the beginning, there is a general problem interest, on which the researcher is gaining first empirical experiences. Selection, direction and precision of the research question are not fixed at the beginning. Those are tasks that are being worked with throughout the research process. The researcher goes into the field, establishing first contacts and gathering first data. Data here is seen in a broad sense. There is diverse material which can be used as data material, e.g. conversations, interviews, observation protocols, documents of the field such as letters, documents of archives etc. This data is being examined in detail with a sense of theoretical openness, and are being brought into perspective with general terms and ideas, to which they refer or with which they are in a reasonable context with. This process is called “coding” Behind it is the search for adequate terms for the found data which can be generalized (Breuer, 2009). In this process it is helpful to form questions: who, what, why, where, how, what results or consequences, what is the actual problem with which the stakeholders are confronted, how can this problem be explained. Coding as stated by Breuer is the classification of certain recorded or symbolically fixed phenomena or incidents to a categorical-theoretical vocabulary and then to generalized terms. The following logic is used: a “xyz” is a “A”; “xyz” is the naming of a visible and easily detectable phenomenon, and “A” is the category on which the former is based on respectively dedicated to (Breuer, 2009).

This means instead of only inspecting the data and then continuing the theory that has been established so far, Grounded Theory insists on coding the material systematically, but with codes on the basis of theoretical concepts and categories, which have to be established gradually from the continues comparing analysis of the data (Strübing, 2004). In this alteration of data gathering and data analysis grounded, general terms are being developed, thus concepts and categories. Those concepts are identified from occurrences and incidents as well as patterns which can be found in the data.

Based on the analysis of the gathered data the researcher decides which phenomena to research next.

The selection of the data that will be analyzed with this process cannot be organized by a selection plan that has been determined beforehand and has been dictated by context unspecific rules (e.g. methodological rules), but has to be carried out on basis of the analytical questions, which can be brought up by the current state of theory building of the concrete current topic or project (Strübing, 2004). There is a constant commuting between different research phases: data gathering, data analysis (coding), and developing a theory (writing memos), those phases alternate in variable sequences. Recesses in this process with a different focus are very likely and can be expedient (Breuer, 2009).

## Process in Grounded Theory

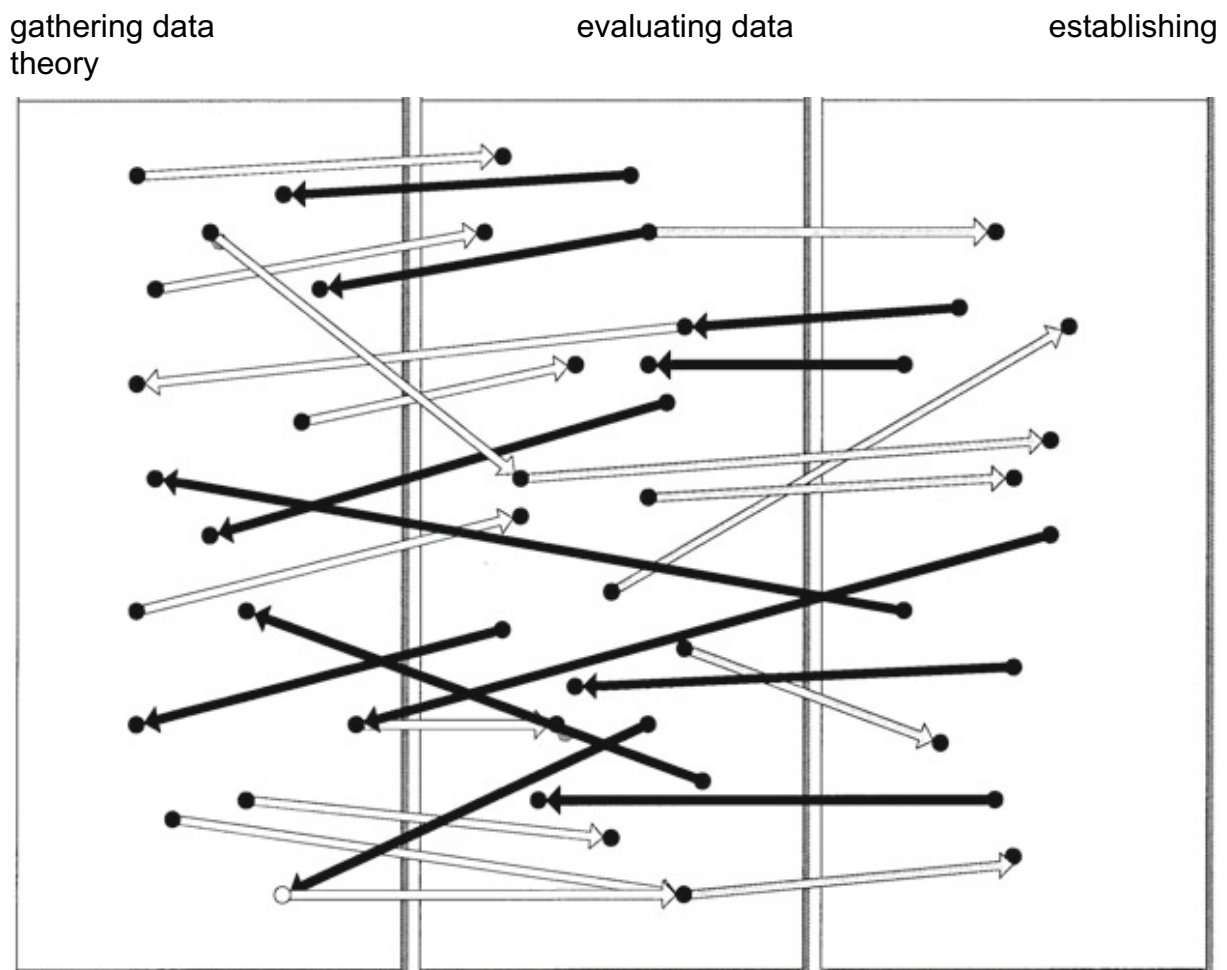


Figure 1 Process in Grounded Theory (Strübing, 2004).

Theoretical sampling is defined as the process of data gathering aiming at the generation of theory, with the researcher simultaneously gathering, coding and analyzing data and deciding which data to survey next and where to find them. This process is controlled through the material of formal theory that is in the process of being developed (Glaser & Strauss, 1998). In practice theoretical sampling is a chain of concerted structured selection decisions, alongside which the selection criteria becomes more specific and distinct in the course of the process (Wiedemann, 1991).

Theoretical sampling is in every stage closely related to the criterion of theoretical saturation. When the examined theoretical concepts of systematic and continued data not only confirm those but do not provide any more characteristics of the concepts, then the sampling strategy is modified: when first the intention was to examine as homogeneous cases as possible regarding the researched phenomenon, after reaching theoretical saturation this strategy of minimum comparison is replaced by a strategy of maximum comparison. This means now data is systematically selected that poses a good chance of presenting divergent characteristics of the researched phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1998).

Writing memos is an essential part of Grounded Theory. As Strübing states there is no approach which focuses so strongly on writing, except for ethnography, than a

Grounded Theory approach. Other than with ethnographies, where the focus is to produce data “in the field” and is an analytical preprocessing of data, here it is support of data analyzing processes in the course of coding. Further Strübing stresses that moreover it is a matter of continued securing of results, exoneration of secondary objects, alleviation of teamwork, theory as process and support of decision making processes in the establishment of theory. Concrete this is the demand to write coherent texts from the beginning of the data analysis, because theoretically relevant decisions are made from the beginning of the analysis and are onwards being developed further, thus it is essential to document the decision process continuously. The suggested *modus operandi* with “memoing” is to see the written texts as temporary texts of a specific aspect of the establishing theory. One of the main reasons for memoing, especially in regards of methodological questions, is to take away the fear of writing first drafts. It is not supposed to be the final article, but merely a temporary attempt, putting vague ideas on record, that later, if proven useful, can be established further in more detail, and be combined with other aspects of the theory, or else be discarded. Furthermore the process of writing, revising, sorting etc. of memos is a concrete step in establishing a theory, which guides to systematization and decisions, because writtenness demands determination and definition and because contradictions are made visible and verifiable in written texts. In practice Strübing elaborates, theoretical concepts emanate from vague ideas, and are worked on gradually, and thus some analytical ideas prove to be nonproductive and are discarded in the course of a project, whereas others unexpectedly get into the center of attention. The quality of the theory is not only dependable on the quality of the analytical work of the data, but as important is the process of the written elaboration. Especially regarding necessary integrating efforts, for example bringing into relation individual elements of theory to a plausible model of correlation, and when connections are made to other relevant theories. There systematic, concept oriented writing is next to sighting the data the central working medium. This illustrates clearly what the notion of theory as process represents (Strübing, 2004).

The aim in Grounded Theory, according to Steinke, is not to produce results, which are representative for a broad population, but to establish a theory, that specifies a phenomenon, by encompassing it through terms of condition (under which the phenomenon occurs), of action and interaction (through which the phenomenon is expressed), of consequences (which result from the phenomenon) (Steinke, 1999). This is established with theoretical sampling, by choosing systematically the deriving data from statements of the theory and its concepts.

The goal of Grounded Theory is to achieve, through the newly generated knowledge, extended actionability. This is especially relevant on two levels. First, based on the findings it should be possible to find new “problems” and research those. A perspective that is inherent to every scientific understanding. And second, it should be suitable for daily use. This means extended actionability for the people in the researched field (Strübing, 2004). Especially the second aim is one that is particularly important in the field of cultural anthropology and one of the reasons this Methodology was chosen for this research.

## **Urban Sustainability**

The era of urban studies has generated an impressive body of literature, which aims to tie “sustainability” and “urban development” together by grounding the many interpretations of sustainability in an urban setting (Turcu, 2013).

According to Suzanne Vallance et al. (2011) the rhetoric surrounding “urban sustainability” seems compelling, but its superficial simplicity hides a raft of complexities and contradictions vis-à-vis the role of economic growth, intergenerational versus intragenerational equity, radical versus incremental change and more. She states that even basic attempts to define the concept of urban sustainability seem to generate a host of rebuttals, refinements and alternatives, and despite extensive discussion it is debatable whether we have a good idea what urban sustainability entails or how we might actually achieve it. Further she argues that its attraction is based on a growing awareness that over half the world’s population reside in cities and towns, and whilst this alone provides a compelling case for the addition of an “urban” prefix to the notion of “sustainability”, the concept draws additional strength from the city’s ability to act as a convenient administrative unit through which the “global” can be made the “local”.

There are a number of approaches to urban sustainability in the literature.

Early theorists highlight bio-physical environmental elements, focusing on the tangible ones, such as public transport, resource consumption, waste disposal and recycling. Rees and Wackernagel (1996: 237) define cities as:

“highly-ordered, dynamic, far-from-equilibrium dissipative structures [that] can grow and develop only because they are able to extract available energy and material from the ecosphere and discharge their waste back into it”.

Rees (1997) states that most studies of urban health and sustainability focus on investment flows, income generation, job creation rates, crime statistics, and other socioeconomic indicators, and criticizes that economic analyses are so abstracted from physical reality that they reveal nothing of the structural, spatial, and time-dependent factors governing ecosystem behavior. He argues that the prevailing focus on money wealth and the economic surpluses generated by “successful” cities is positively misleading respecting ecological health and long-term stability, and stresses that the urban ecosystem requires a direct focus on the material, energy, and information flows that sustain the human population. In this sense a sustainable city is one that causes no disorder to the host ecosystem by reducing its dependence on external flows, rehabilitating stocks of natural capital and promoting the use of local resources. Which leads to the conclusion that most cities, and most towns as well, are currently unsustainable.

Yet, bio-physical environmental sustainability is only one ambition and must be balanced against socio-cultural and economic imperatives.

Clark et al. (2002) have argued that the post-industrial city can be seen as a kind of entertainment engine that must facilitate the quality of life of citizens who view their surroundings almost as tourists do, which means there is high priority for aesthetics, services and attractiveness.

There is also a corpus of studies that have focused on “anthropo-centric” views of urban sustainability, including:

- A city’s capacity to “endure”, by undertaking activities which produce lasting benefits or deal with long-term urban problems (Thake 1995, Alsbourne Associates 1999)
- A city’s “demand-based” approach to undertake activities that respond to peoples’s needs and encourage them to live in communities, equating “sustainability” with “popularity” and “quality of life” (Smith et.al. 1998, Evans 2000)



- A city's drive to optimize both environmental and human resources, with an emphasis on democratic and participative outcomes (DETR 1999, Hall and Pfeiffer 2000)

Vallance (2011) argues that a bio-physical focus is problematic, first it is ignoring the social world in favor of manipulating the built form of the city and its components shifts our focus to the physical world rather than the behavior, aspirations and experiences of the residents. Second she states, that the integrative potential of urban sustainability is lost, because a discourse that focuses on bio-physical elements, (urban) sustainability lacks social and cultural dynamism and it therefore fails to situate what should be "rational" responses to environmental problems in meaningful urban context. She emphasizes that instead the question should be whether the practices of city-building, living, producing and consuming are sustainable because urban form is a snapshot of more or less sustainable processes and not a measure of sustainability in itself. This means, she continues, that overemphasizing the bio-physical environmental aspects of urban sustainability and ignoring everyday activities and contexts where people actually work, live and play, is unlikely to be successful, or sustainable, in the long run.

While Vallance's focus is on the people living in the city, which clearly is an approach of social sciences, it must be noted that the question of sustainability is not at all an objective one. As Turcu (2013) argues, it is a political and social one as well which points to the difficulty of comprehending the "social construction" of sustainability, and therefore unlikely to be "objective", but likely to serve a certain scope, and is conflictual and manipulated (by e.g. various expert and citizen groups involved). Zeijl-Rozema and Martens (2010) state that sustainability "is not a single, well-defined concept; rather, various positions and perspectives exist – whichever view is propagated, it entails a normative choice".

This statement repeats partly what Vallance argues as well, namely that there is no good explanation for urban sustainability, but it also takes it a step further by continuing that it is always a question of positioning oneself and by perspective. Thus there is no agreed way of defining the extent to which sustainability is being attained in any sector. Therefore in the planned Master thesis it is not the intention to add to the discussion of urban sustainability, whether we know what it entails, if we can actually achieve it or not. The focus will be on the people living in Ljubljana and Barcelona, but contrary to Vallences approach, by focusing on the population and then reintegrating this data into the sustainability discussion, here the goal is to go beyond this framing of urban sustainability, and demonstrate on concrete manifestations respectively phenomena what and how this labelling of the city changes the everyday life of the population of Ljubljana and Barcelona.

## Conclusion

This paper was started with a short overview of the Green Capital Award, what it represents and entails and why it was established. Followed by an overview of the measures that have been taken by the city of Ljubljana in order to receive this award this year. Those changes include protection and preservation of green areas, waste management, focusing on pedestrian and cycling networks and reducing respectively closing down certain areas of the city for car traffic. Next the city of Barcelona and it's project of Superblocks was introduced and some similarities between the two cities

were briefly discussed. This was done to outline what the starting point for the planned research is. Ljubljana has made several substantial changes in the last 10-15 years especially. In Barcelona on the other hand those changes are in the beginning stages yet. Establishing those helps determining where the research interests lie. It was clear immediately that “sustainability” was the main, obvious topic. In a further step this topic was discussed. Firstly the different approaches to sustainability respectively urban sustainability were introduced, and then in a second step it was explained that there is no good explanation what sustainability entails, or how to achieve it. Furthermore it was concluded that there is always a certain objective, perspective and point of view in all sustainability discussions. Therefore it is not possible to define the extent to which sustainability is, or is not attained in any sector. Thus making clear that it is not the goal of the planned Master thesis to add yet another contribution to the sustainability discussion. The focus rather lies on the stakeholders in the field and on how the changes around the said labelling have and still do affect their concrete everyday life.

The chosen method is Grounded Theory, which has a general problem interest in the beginning, as is the case in the Master thesis, and throughout the research process this general interest becomes more precise and narrow. One of the goals of Grounded Theory is to gain more actionability, not only for the researcher, but also for the stakeholders in the field in their everyday life. This is one of the reasons this method was chosen. When doing anthropological research, it is inherent that the research process is not only for the benefit of science, but as importantly that the findings of the research are being reflected and played back to the stakeholders in the field, as to enable them to have more actionability.

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